DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 749 CS 003 980

AUTHOR Dixon, Carol N.
TITLE Inferences about a Basis for Comprehension: Beginning Reader.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (27th, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 1-3, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Reading; *Beginning Reading; Comparative Analysis; Grade 1; High Achievers; Low Achievers; *Prediction; Primary Education; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Readiness; *Reading Research; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS *Story Structure

ABSTRACT

Reader ability to predict text structure based on previous experiences with written language appears to be an important foundation for comprehension of reading materials. A pilot study was conducted to explore ways of comparing the story structure awareness of beginning readers. Story schema analyses of stories told by eight first-graders--four who had achieved high reading readiness scores and four with low scores--indicated that the only stories that did not at all fit the story schema requirements were two of the stories told by high-readiness children. An analysis of basal reader pre-primer stories showed that these stories also did not fit the story schema framework, indicating that the stories of the high-readiness children may reflect changing expectations for written language based on encounters with such material. Comparison of the children's stories through the use of propositional analysis indicated that stories by high-readiness children contained significantly more total propositions than those by low-readiness children, which may reflect distinctions between the two groups in both oral language fluency and expectancies for written language. (GW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED151749

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Carol N. Dixon
U. of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California 93106

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carol N. Dixon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

INFERENCES ABOUT A BASIS FOR COMPREHENSION: BEGINNING READER

Carol N. Dixon
University of California, Santa Barbara

What basis for comprehension does the beginning reader bring to the reading task? In recent years emphasis has been placed on the role of prediction in the process of reading (Stauffer, 1975; Smith, 1977). It has been suggested that the prediction process takes place both during advanced stages of reading competency, as the successful reader tries to "guess" the author's message and at the beginning stages of reading where the prediction processes focus more intently on individual word recognition and story organization. Smith (1977) has suggested that the beginning reader is often misled at this initial stage by expectancies, built on experience with oral language, which may not be appropriate for

CS003980

written language. "Written language is different from speech." (Smith, p. 386) "Children who expect to read in the way they make sense of spoken language are likely to have difficulty in comprehending print and thus in learning to read. Their predictions will be all wrong." (Smith, p. 392)

If it is true that natural but erroneous predictions on the part of beginning readers, based on their experience with oral language, do interfere with comprehension of written language, then Smith suggests that one way of remedying the situation would be to expose beginning readers to all types of written materials by reading to them , thus increasing the accuracy of their prediction abilities. The recommendation to read to children is hardly novel. Numerous studies dating back to (and beyond) the Durkin work on early readers have advocated the benefit to be gained from reading to children from a variety of printed materials. However, the suggested theoretical role of prediction based on previous experiences with both oral and written language helps to explain why "reading to children" has seemed to raise their own reading proficiency.

Rationale

Reading to children not only gives them experience with how words are used in written language, but also with how text is structured. The beginning reader's awareness of what written language is like then becomes an important consideration in the attempt to explain why some children profit from reading instruction and others do not. Researchers have found that able readers do recognize and use text structure in recalling information from the text. (Drum and Lantaff, 1977) "It is suggested that if readers (or listeners) come in contact with enough stories, they internalize this

story grammar. These readers (or listeners) can then use this internalized story grammar to help them understand and remember a new story by anticipating and recalling basic structural elements of the plot." (Cunningham & Foster, 1978, p. 365). Reader ability to predict text structure based on previous experiences, seems then to be an important foundation for comprehension of written material. The problem then becomes one of measuring that text or story structure expectation held by the beginning reader. This pilot study begins an exploration of ways to compare the written langauge or story structure awareness of beginning readers, using techniques originally developed to measure prose recall of stories read or heard.

Procedure and Results

Eight first graders were individually asked to make up a story about a hand puppet which they had not seen previously and which was not labeled for them in any way by the examiner. They were to tell the story to the examiner and were told that the story would be written down, and that they would then read the story with the examiner. The children had been preselected on the basis of Metropolitan Reading Readiness test scores. Four children (high) had scored at or above the 95 percentile, while the other four (low) had scored at or below the 5th percentile.

The primary goal was to acquire creative stories produced by children which could be compared to determine the feasibility of using different prose scoring procedures developed for measuring story recall. It was hypothesized that telling the children that the story would be written down, and that they would then "read it" would cause the children to produce a story which approximated their expectations for written language. This in turn might also produce some insights into differences in written language

expectations of beginning readers. The eight stories were compared using story schema (Mandler and Johnson, 1977), and propositional analysis (Drum and Lantaff, 1977) approaches.

Story schema comparisons of the stories proved to be both fascinating and difficult.

> "The essential structure of a single episode story is that a protagonist is introduced in the setting; there follows an episode in which something happens, causing the protagonist to respond to is, which in turn brings about some event or state of affairs that ends the episode. The simplest story must have at least four propositions, representing a setting, beginning, development, and ending, if it is to be considered a story." (Mandler, 1977)

The setting serves to introduce the protagonist and other characters. It may also include information as to time and place, but that is not an absolute requirement. The beginning consists of one or more events which cause the protagonist to respond. The development consists of the protagonist's reaction to the event, resulting in an action or attempt to reach a goal, and finally events are concluded by the ending or outcome. Events within stories are connected by and, then, or cause relationships.

However, just what constitutes a reaction, action, or goal remains unclear. As Mandler asserts "judgements of what make a well-formed story are largely intuitive" (p. 149). From this intuitive decision-making base, three of the four low-readiness children showed a clear awareness of story structure, with stories that fit easily into the story schema framework (Figure 1). The fourth low-readiness story and two high-readiness stories can be stretched into the simple story framework but it seems intuitively to be a false fit since the protagonists' actions seem to be more appropriately regarded as descriptors which are really a part of setting than as actions in response to an event (Figure 2). The remaining two high-readiness

stories do not seem to fit the story schema requirements for a simple story. (Figure 3)

It is not possible on the basis of the story schema analysis of dictated stories to say that some of the children do not have "story structure awareness." However, it is possible to say that some clearly can recognize and use the text structures necessary to comprehend the simple story format one would expect a beginning reader to encounter. The question would seem to be why do supposedly low-readiness children apparently show more story structure awareness in their stories than high-readiness children? Smith (1977) has suggested that "the artificial language of school books...is so different from any other spoken or written form that...such language tends to be quite unpredictable for many children, who may then have enormous difficulty understanding and learning to read from it." (p. 394)

Attempts to do story schema analysis of "stories" from two different widely used pre-primers (used in first grade classes at approximately the same time of year that the dictated stories were recorded) proved impossible. Neither qualified under the Mandler requirements as a single story. Both are more accurately labeled as "setting accounts" where the actual "story" is told through the pictures, or where those sections which are labeled as "stories" are in reality only events within the story presented by a larger section of the book. In the first case children are required to "read" and comprehend pictures rather than words. In the second case, considerable long-term memory is required for the reader to arrive at a meaningful story.

The stories of the high-readiness children may be reflections of changing expectations for written language, based on encounters with such written material. Part of their success in learning to read may come from their ability to alter their "story" expectations, based on experience with beginning

reading materials. Their elaborated setting-account stories are actually more like those "stories" encountered in early reading materials than the "true stories" of their low-readiness peers. Low-readiness students may encounter difficulties based on their failure to change expectations, and hence their perception of reading as a meaningful task. Certainly the child whose dragon ate his friend and then feels remorse has different story expectancies than provided by "Jane said, 'Look here, Dick'." (Scott, Foresmen, 1965, p. 8)

Propositional analysis provides a further comparison of stories from "high" and "low" - readiness children. Propositional analysis added an additional dimension to the comparison of the story structure awareness of high (Figure 4) and low (Figure 5) readiness children. The differences found were quantitative rather than qualitative in nature.

(Insert Table I)

Stories from the high-readiness children contained more than 50 percent more total propositions than those from low-readiness children. High-readiness stories had almost twice as many clausal propositions and level 2 attribute propositions as low-readiness stories. These differences would seem to reflect distinctions between the two groups in both oral language fluency and their subsequent expectancies for written language. The propositional analysis framework suggested by Drum and Lantaff (1977) would seem to have potential for oral language-story structure awareness research as well as for prose recall.

Discussion

Use of both story schema and propositional analysis models may provide valuable ways of determining the story structure awareness basis for comprehension which the beginning reader brings to the reading act. As stated earlier,

this study represented only an introductory investigation of the feasibility of using these two analysis techniques. Much additional research needs to to done. The study should be validated with a larger sample. Comparisons of stories from children at different maturational stages and perhaps different intellectual levels should be undertaken. The prose analysis techniques used in this study have shown promise, but it may be that other approaches should also be used. Perhaps several analysis techniques, used jointly in an over-lay effect, will provide the best means of assessing the beginning reader's basis for comprehension.

Bibliography

Cunningham, J. & Foster, E. "The ivory tower connection: a case study," The Reading Teacher, 1978, 31.

Drum, P.A. & Lantaff, R.E. "Scoring categories for protocols," paper presented at Second Annual Language Conference, Boston University, October, 1977 (In press, Conference Proceedings).

Mandler, J. & Johnson, N. "Remembrance of things parsed: story structure and recall," Cognitive Psychology, 1977, 9.

Robinson, H., Monroe, M., Artley, A., Huck, C. and Jenkins, W. "Jane," Fun With The Family, Scott Foresman Co., 1965.

Smith, F. "Making sense of reading--and of Reading Instruction," Harvard Educational Review, Fall, 1977.

Stauffer, R. Directing the Reading-Thinking Process, Harper & Row, 1975.

Table I

Propositional Analysis	Low-Readiness		High-Readiness	
	$\bar{X}$	Range	$\bar{X}$	Range
Total No. of Propositions	8.5	6-14	13	10-15
Hierarchy 1 Propositions	4	3- 6	7	6- 9
*Hierarchy 2 Propositions	3.5	1- 8	5.5	2- 9
*Hierarchy 3 Propositions	.7	0- 1	.25	0- 1

*Hierarchy 2 propositions elaborate or refine level 1 propositions; hierarchy 3 propositions elaborate or refine level 2 propositions.

Figure 1

ATE FRIEND

Setting	1.	A dragon was in the forest with his friend
Beginning	2.	and then he got mad at a boy
Development	3.	and he ate him
Outcome	4.	Then he cried
	5.	because he missed his friend

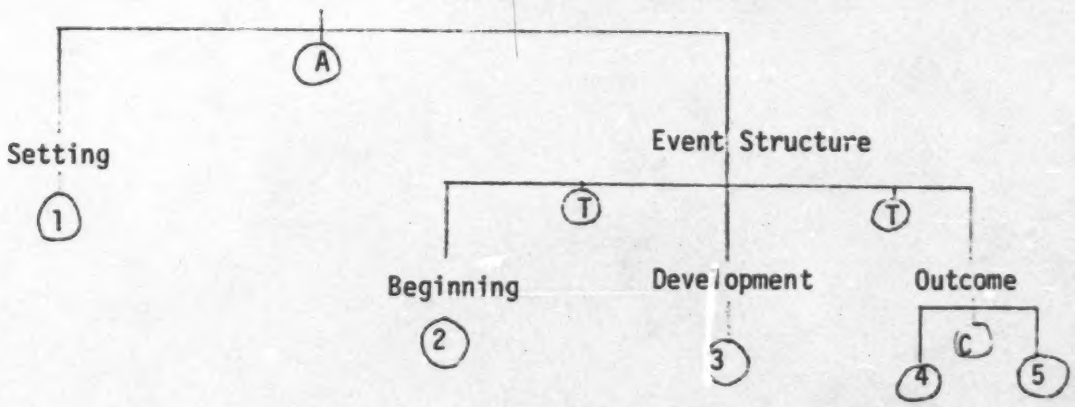

Figure 2

WALLY

Setting	1.	This is Wally the alligator
	2.	He had one brother
	3.	and two sisters
Beginning	4.	Everyday he likes to go
	5.	and take a swim in the pond
Development	6.	It's really fun
Outcome	7.	Why don't you try it
	8.	It's really fun

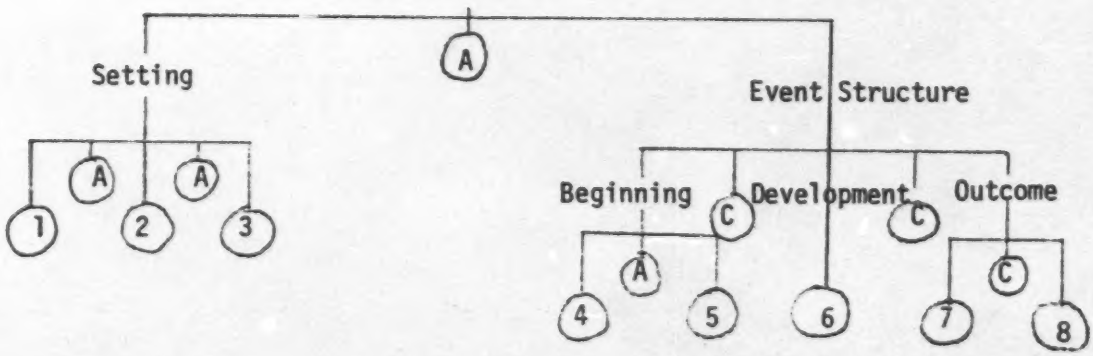

Figure 3

BABY DINOSAUR

1. He is a baby dinosaur
2. And he is green
3. He has two teeth
4. And he has a red nose
5. He has ruffles
6. He eats leafs
7. And he eats fruit in the forest
8. He likes to burn down things
9. and trees

Figure 4

LOW READINESS

A dragon live in a cave. He comes out sometimes. Knights are

fighting with the dragon. The dragon won. He's a big, big dragon.

1. LIVE IN; dragon, cave
2. COMES OUT; he(dragon)
3. SOMETIMES: COMES OUT
4. ARE FIGHTING; knights, dragon
5. WON; dragon
6. IS; he, dragon
7. BIG, BIG; dragon

Figure 5

HIGH READINESS

I always eat things. I take baths in ponds. I go see my friends. I play with them. I go to sleep at night. Then I get up in the morning and eat breakfast again, and start all over.

1. EAT; I, things
2. ALWAYS; eat
3. TAKE; I, baths
4. IN PONDS; take baths
5. GO (TO) SEE; I, friends
6. MY; friends
7. PLAY WITH; I, them
8. GO TO SLEEP; I
9. AT NIGHT; go to sleep
10. GET UP THEN; I
11. IN MORNING; get up
12. EAT; (I), breakfast
13. AGAIN; eat
14. START ALL OVER; (I)